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The Peace Corps at 50

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Guest column: Peace Corps aims to unite world with understanding

(This op-ed appeared in the Dayton Daily News on March 3, 2011.)

This commentary was written by Julius Amin, who was born and raised in Cameroon and is chair of the history department at the University of Dayton.

Thirty years ago, Peace Corps volunteer Alvin Blake and I were colleagues at the Government High School in Limbe, Cameroon, where he taught economics and I taught history.

Blake, an African-American, was inspiring to students, and they flocked to his side. He absorbed the local culture, ate the food, shopped at the market, enjoyed the music and frequented the bars.

Always unselfish with his time, Blake volunteered at different places, including teaching evening school. I talked to him many times about my plans to leave Cameroon and pursue graduate work in the United States.

Privately, I wondered why he really came to Cameroon, why he left the comfort of his home to come and live so far away. Years later, those answers would come to me as I became immersed in Peace Corps research.

In fact, Blake's Peace Corps experience is typical of many of the volunteers I have studied in my more than 20 years of researching the topic. Themes of friendship, fulfillment, transformation, service and social responsibility dominate Peace Corps stories and offer a glimpse into an aspect of the American character often underemphasized these days.

It was 50 years ago that John F. Kennedy tapped into that part of the American character and launched the Peace Corps. Thousands of young people answered his challenge. Today more than 200,000 American volunteers have served — and are serving — in nations across the globe.

Over the years, volunteers have served in education, health care, community development, small-business enterprise and HIV-prevention programs.

At the same time, they have acted as bridges of cultural understanding, offering to their hosts a picture of the promise, as well as the challenge, of American life.

Once they've come home, they've reflected back to fellow Americans their experiences living in the wider world.

Indeed, the Peace Corps' most enduring significance is its role as a pioneer and facilitator in today's great challenge: globalization.

In host countries, volunteers examine themselves and their values. Peace Corps volunteers discover a world beyond the stereotypical tourist sites depicted in casual reading and postcards and learn to appreciate the merits of living in a global village.

They learn that globalization is not just about economic imperatives; it is also about human dignity, understanding and respect.

Several organizations have been founded by returning volunteers to carry on the work and sustain the bonds formed in their experience. They carry names such as Friends of Pakistan, Friends of Kyrgyzstan and Friends of the Dominican Republic.

Those organizations provide information to Americans and suggest ways to foster understanding between the people of those nations and the people of the United States.

To date, the half-century track record of the Peace Corps speaks for itself: In the U.S., there are thousands upon thousands of Americans, spanning three generations, who are more knowledgeable of the world and more engaged with its problems, thanks to some direct or indirect experience with the Peace Corps.

Across the planet today can be found thousands of instances of Peace Corps initiatives, not only in the countless physical structures such as schools, health clinics and agro-forestry programs, but also in the warm memories and appreciation of the people who have come to know the volunteers and their work first-hand.

As Americans strive to understand and master the challenges of the global era, it is important to remember the legacy and promise of the Peace Corps. Indeed, the agency shines as one of the best expressions of American ideals and the volunteers as examples of some of the best qualities of American character.

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